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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 LAGOS 002493

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [EPET](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [EINV](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: ETHNIC CLASHES ON THE BENIN RIVER

REF: A. ABUJA 1761

[B](#). LAGOS 2193

[C](#). LAGOS 2434

Classified By: JGREGOIRE FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

[1](#). (SBU) SUMMARY: On Friday, December 5, Itsekiri militants attacked Ijaws in boats and in villages on the Benin River, north of Warri. There are reports of houses burned and 19 persons killed. Nigerian military forces reacted quickly, and although some related skirmishes were reported on Saturday, calm was restored Sunday. Ijaw representatives tell us they intend no violence in turn, but tension in the Delta has been raised a notch in anticipation of a possible Ijaw retaliation. END SUMMARY.

[2](#). (C) On Friday afternoon, December 5, Post received information from several sources that Itsekiri militants attacked Ijaws on the Benin River, northeast of Warri in the Niger Delta region. Several days prior to these reports, the NGO IFESH, which receives financial support from the USG to conduct conflict resolution and skills training programs among all ethnic groups in the region, informed Mission personnel that it was working to avert a rumored Itsekiri raid on Ijaw-held villages. Late in the afternoon on December 5, Lieutenant Colonel Dogo, Commanding Officer of the Nigerian Army's Seventh Battalion based in Warri, told Econoff that an attack had taken place, but that it was minor and limited to boats and villages along the Benin River. Col. Dogo said that forces from the Nigerian military joint task force, deployed to the area under the aegis Operation Restore Hope, swiftly interceded and ended the clashes.

The Itsekiri Arise

[3](#). (C) The Itsekiri have thousands of internally displaced persons in the environs of Sapele, which sits on the Benin River north of Warri. During the bloody clashes of March and April 2003, Ijaw are said to have raided Itsekiri villages along the Benin River, driving Itsekiri from the area and resettling the villages in place of the Itsekiris. During a visit to the region in October, displaced persons in Sapele told Poloff, Econoff and CRO of Ijaw raids, which, they claimed, resulted in dozens of deaths, razed homes and entire villages emptied of Itsekiri (ref A). Mission staff also visited the town of Koko, which lies on the Benin River north of Sapele. Itsekiri from Koko told Mission staff of a raid on that town that destroyed many homes and buildings, including the well-developed local government compound, and resulted in numerous deaths. Destruction consistent with accounts of the raid remained visible, and the population of Itsekiri currently living in Koko is far below the town's structural capacity. At the time of the Mission staff visit, Itsekiri of all stripes begged for assistance to return to their homes and rebuild their villages and fishing capabilities. But they also insisted that if pushed much farther by the Ijaw, they would counter by whatever means necessary to stop what they consider to be a form of ethnic cleansing, in order to return to their home villages. In October, several clashes between the Itsekiri and Ijaw prompted Chevron to review contingency plans for its facilities at Escravos, and security consultants onsite told us that the Itsekiri were planning for an eventual return to their homes (ref B).

[4](#). (C) On Monday, December 8, Econoff spoke with Kevin Drake, a security consultant with Control Risk Group, currently working at Chevron's Escravos oil terminal and tank farm Southwest of Warri. Drake told Econoff that the attacks of December 5 took place in two locations, one near the village of Oye near the mouth of the Benin River, and the other near Koko. Drake described the area around the mouth of the Benin River at the Gulf of Guinea as being Itsekiri lands. He said the Ijaw, having previously replaced Itsekiri inhabitants in the region, control a small strip of swamp along the Benin River north of Oye, sandwiched between what has traditionally been Itsekiri communities. He said on Friday, December 5,

Itsekiri raiding parties from Oye attacked several Ijaw boats. He was unclear as to the fate of the Ijaw, but he said the boats were later taken up river to Koko. He noted that the initial Itsekiri attacks were against Gbaramatu clans of the Ijaw, but that Ijaw from the Egbema clan were later involved in skirmishes. This is consistent with news reports indicating Itsekiri attacked several Ijaw villages along the Benin River, which would now be home to Egbema Ijaw. News reports estimate up to 19 persons were killed.

Military Uses Helicopters

15. (C) During the time of the attacks, according to Drake, the crew of a Nigerian Joint Task Force helicopter flying along the Benin River spotted one or more Itsekiri speedboats with armed men on board. Drake said the Task Force has previously made it clear it will not tolerate any speedboat activity on the rivers that appears to involve raids or illegal activity. The helicopter crew buzzed the boat or boats, which caused the militants to divert their course, stand down, and take cover in the swamps. Drake said that as far as he knows, no shots were fired from the helicopter. BBC radio reported on December 9 that military helicopters were used to buzz the areas around raided villages, and that automatic weapons were fired from helicopters into villages. The BBC reporter quoted Brigadier General Zamani, commanding officer of the Joint Task Force, as saying that his forces were using helicopters as a means to disperse clashing elements, and that shots may have been fired for that effect, although the reporter quoted other witnesses as suggesting the military had taken sides. We have no confirmation of this report at this time.

16. (C) Chevron's security consultant Drake told Econoff that skirmishes between the Itsekiri and Ijaw continued through Saturday, but by Sunday all was quiet. He noted that statements in the press from Nigerian military commanders reporting robust deployment of forces through the riverine area were merely "bullish, overblown propaganda," since, by his estimate, the military has little logistics capacity to deploy troops by boat in the region. A print news report on December 8 suggested that a Navy vessel was taken by Ijaw militants and several naval crewmen held hostage. We have no corroboration of that report, and one Ijaw leader denied to Poloff any knowledge of such an incident.

Clashes Limited to the Creeks

17. (C) Drake told Econoff he is confident that at this time there is no threat against Chevron oil facilities in the Delta from this latest spate of ethnic clashes. He said these attacks are strictly inter-ethnic land grabs and retaliatory strikes, and because this fight is for land along the Benin River, it should not threaten the company's facilities at Escravos. Chevron has not yet returned to its other facilities in the swamps of the Niger Delta after most were closed due to vandalism and safety concerns in the wake of the larger unrest of March and April.

Ijaw Promise Not to Retaliate

18. (C) On December 8 and 9, Poloff spoke with several sources within the various Ijaw communities. All stated that the current Ijaw position is defensive and that retaliations would only come if another attack is visited upon them. Dan Ekpeditibe, an Ijaw Youth leader and Secretary of the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC), the organization believed responsible for starting the recent trend of kidnappings and extortion, corroborated the reports and stated that although the riverine areas are tense, Warri is relatively calm. When asked about the hijacking of a naval vessel and the hostage-taking of naval personnel, Ekpeditibe stated he was not aware of the incident. Joel Bisina, President of the Niger Delta Professionals for Development and moderate Ijaw, also discussed the river attacks with Poloff. Bisina, who recently attended decision-making meetings with various groups of the Egbema clan of the Ijaws, confirmed the Egbema's decision to also stand down and take a defensive posture. In response to the Itsekiri attacks, the Ijaws are attempting to meet with Delta State Governor James Ibori on December 9 to advocate for a political solution. The solution, however, is a repeated demand from the Ijaw to create more Local Government Areas in Ijaw territory.

19. (C) COMMENT. While Ijaw representatives tell us they will not stage reprisal raids against the Itsekiri for last weekend's attacks, their forbearance is unlikely to be a lasting guarantee of peace between these ethnic groups. Their villages are scattered throughout the wild and complicated Niger Delta swamps and creeks, and coordination is difficult. The Ijaw are more factionalized than the Itsekiri, with several leaders, groups and NGOs claiming to represent part or all of the Ijaw interest. Governor Ibori of Delta State appointed several Ijaw as special advisors to his peace process, an effect of which has been to further instill a feeling of mistrust among the more militant factions of Ijaw clans. Both sides have weapons and threaten to use them to defend themselves and their interests. Thus, the greatest danger in the Delta remains the possibility that a series of small skirmishes will spiral out of control, causing scores of deaths, massive dislocation of villagers, and possibly renewed attacks on oil installations in the region. Nigerian military action remains a wild card. The military response in the region since the build-up of Operation Restore Hope has been measured and relatively effective, and the Navy recently increased its presence in the deeper waters of the Delta (ref C). However, given the brazenness in which illegal and violent activities have taken place recently, a heavy-handed military response with civilian casualties -- as was seen in recent years during other Nigerian internal conflicts -- still weighs on the minds of Delta watchers as a possible worst-case scenario.

END COMMENT.
HINSON-JONES